

# **SEMINAR PAPER**

## **TITLE: A CRITIQUE OF WOMEN CHARACTERS IN CONGREVE'S *THE WAY* *OF THE WORLD***

2

### **ABSTRACT**

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CONGREVE'S *THE WAY OF THE WORLD***

The Restoration Age served as the pioneer for women to enter into the theatres after the restoration of Charles II, the monarch of England. Their witty dialogues, fashionable outfits and masque personalities mainly characterized women in this age.

In Congreve's *The Way of the World*, the women characters are bold and held a free spirit. They have no regard for the social institution called marriage. They develop illicit relationships in order

to escape the boredom of married life. It was the favourite past time of women to discuss about scandalous affairs, their secret and private lives and gossip about rich and wealthy men. The satire upon women seems to be more prominent through Lady Wishfort's character. The female characters equally take part in verbal confrontation and whose behaviour is unlike the other typical women of Restoration period.

It is in this context, we attempt to examine critically the women characters of the play.

**KEYWORDS:** Fashion, Masque, Free Spirit, Verbal confrontation

The restoration of Charles II to the throne of England, in the eyes of the world, marked the beginning of the Restoration Age. The strength of the religious-political passions of the time is reflected in the literature of Restoration Age. Restoration Drama did not, however, pick up from where the earlier drama had left off. The sudden release from Puritan morality resulted in a wild abandon. Thus, this age encouraged an age of immorality and indecency. This was most prominent in the writings, especially comedies. Lecherous men and women were central characters of those comedies.

Women of this age held a free spirit and the institution of marriage did not play a serious role in those times. Married women often had illicit relationships with wealthy men. Possession of fortune played a crucial part in the existence of love relations and age was a factor least cared about in the Restoration age. The amorous widows or other old characters were also found in desperate need of love, where again fortune played its part. The aged are ready to give away their wealth to have the love of the younger opposite sex. The chocolate and coffee houses, St. James's Park were a place of gathering for wits and it is where the female characters take pleasure in gossiping private and secret lives of others.

"The fine flower of Restoration", as said by David Daiches, is reflected in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*. Congreve presents before us a replica of the society of his time. Every character is a representative of the Restoration society, but the way in which Congreve presents the women characters drawn from the upper-class of his day in his play is unsurpassable. Each one has one or the other trait of the Restoration women in them. Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood are character representations of Restoration women indulged in illicit relationships. Next is Lady Wishfort, an important character who adds humour to the play. Congreve paves a way for a modern day independent woman through his female lead character, Millamant. She is distinguished from other Restoration heroine by

her dazzling wit and serious but independent attitude. Lastly, Foible is the typical Restoration character whose loyalty is only to herself.

Money is power, the power to control others. The three people who possess this wealth are Lady Wishfort, her daughter Mrs. Fainall, and her niece Millamant; but control of this money rests entirely in Lady Wishfort and from the first scene, we are aware of her presence presiding over the lives of the others. Though money is power, it becomes an effective instrument of power only if it is carefully protected and judiciously handled. A fool and his money are soon parted; Lady Wishfort misuses her power and ends up by becoming a helpless pawn in the hands of more clever personalities.

Lady Wishfort is a character type with a long tradition in drama - the over-eager, man-seeking widow. She is first described by Mirabell, who points out that her character is defined in the tag-name, Lady Wishfort. She is fifty-five years of age that seemed very old to the precocious and brilliant thirty years old:

*And who has been the Foundress of this sect? My Lady Wishfort, I warrant who publishes her Detestation of Mankind; and full of Vigour of Fifty five, declares for a Friend and Ratafia; and let Posterity shift for itself, she'll breed no more. (1.1.63-67)*

Her vanity is made clear from the first; she misinterpreted Mirabell's flattery, which he describes in the first act:

*I did as much as man cou'd, with any reasonable Conscience; I proceeded to the very last Act of Flattery with her, and was guilty of a Song in her Commendation: Nay, I got a Friend to put her into a Lampoon... (1.1.72-85)*

She is foiled by Mirabell who makes love to her so that he may win her niece, Millamant. It is evident from here that she is by no means a stupid person, but her vivid and richly metaphorical language reveals an energetic and imaginative mind. In the third act, the picture of Lady Wishfort at her toilette ridicules the woman who

does not accept the fact of her age gracefully:

*I'm as pale as a faint, I look like Mrs. Qualmsick the curate's wife, that's always breeding (3.1.24-26)*

Her indecorous interest in men is a part of her character and it is for this nature she has misinterpreted Mirabell and Mirabell too has hoped that Waitwell's wooing may be successful. Lady Wishfort has two weaknesses – her genuine love for her daughter, and her fascination for Mirabell because when Millamant assures her that Mirabell will go away forever, there is both relief and regret in her. She never quite succeeds in freeing herself from his hypnotic charm:

*Are you sure it will be the last time? – If I were sure of that -- Shall I never see him again? (5.1.352-353)*

Though Lady Wishfort has fascination for Mirabell, she is conscious of what she speaks about him in front of Mrs. Marwood because Marwood is jealous of Mirabell being in love with Millamant. She pours poison into Lady Wishfort's ear. So Lady Wishfort's image of Mirabell is engraved on the influence of Marwood:

*O, he carries Poison in his Tongue that would corrupt Integrity itself.(3.1.60-61)*

As a woman who controls considerable wealth, she is accustomed to having her own way; she is abrupt and tyrannical with her maid:

*Ratafia, Fool. No, Fool. Not the Ratafia, Fool – Grant me Patience! ... A Pox take you both..... (3.1.14-23)*

She does not like to be crossed and does not expect to be and when someone does, she bursts out in rage with threatening and tyrannical words:

*Ods my life, I'll have him, I'll have him murder'd. I'll have him poison'd..... (3.1.103-106)*

Congreve has probed this character further. Her vanity and

man chasing both have a common source; she lives in a world of fantasy. She looks into mirrors constantly but does not see what everyone else sees. In her mind, she can still be a girl of sixteen or a beautiful young woman:

*Dost thou take me for a Fair (3.1.32)*

Lady Wishfort is therefore; especially susceptible to flattery, for there is no touch of good sense to help her see through it. Because of her susceptibility to flattery, her friends are always ill-chosen. Everyone she trusts betrays her to a greater or lesser degree: Apparently, her closest friend is Mrs. Marwood; her daughter and ward are both prepared to go along with a plot that would trick her in a most humiliating way; her maid, Foible, on whom she depends, plays a major part in the plot. In her dilemma in the last act, she is bewildered and helpless:

*'Twas against my Consent that she marry'd this Barbarian... dear Friend, is there no Comfort for me... (5.1.312-319)*

Her yearning for a lover is as much a need to reassure her that she is not totally 'decayed' as it is the actual physical hunger for sex, but her total lack of self-confidence betrays itself in her confusion as to how she should meet Sir Rowland. She has lost all sense of proportion, and decorum, for her, has become merely a show of respectability behind which anything can be hidden. The scene with Sir Rowland thus becomes a parody of all love-scenes, and her insistence that she is not making "a Prostitution of Decorums" is a pathetically transparent cloak that serves only to emphasize her longing for "the Iteration of Nuptials". However, Lady Wishfort as mother and guardian has a depth beyond the usual of her type. As a mother, she did not always act wisely. Her choice of a husband for her ward might be incongruous, but it is certainly well intentioned. Sir Wilfull does have sterling qualities, although he is hardly the right choice for Millamant. The result is that Lady Wishfort, by the end of

the play, has gained a certain measure of good will from the audience. Her character has been so exaggerated that she is almost turned into a caricature. She is a complex creation, the butt of the author's satire and actors' ridicule, yet the object of some painful sympathy.

Mrs. Millamant is generally conceded to be the most charming heroine in restoration comedy. She is a fitting partner-antagonist to Mirabell. Millamant appears significantly in four scenes: her first appearance in Act II Scene I, her dialogue with Mrs. Marwood in Act III Scene I, her scene with Sir Wilfull in Act IV Scene I, the proviso scene with Mirabell in Act IV Scene I where she demands her rights after she will be married to him. Millamant contains within her personality an attractive haughtiness. She maintains the same self-control to the very end of the proviso scene where she demands her liberty that she wished to have after her marriage with Mirabell. She laid her demands to which Mirabell has to agree in order to marry her:

*I'll lye a Bed in a Morning as long as I please...I won't be called Names after I'm Marry'd...not kiss before folks... (4.1.194-214)*

She too loves Mirabell but shows no sentiment. Mirabell is aware of her faults- and comes to love them. She can be sweet and charming, but there can be acid and irony in her wit. Millamant's sparkling gaiety delights all who come near her, for her wit is never directed at anyone, it is the natural exuberance of her personality:

*I could consent to wear 'em, if they wou'd wear alike; but Fools never wear out... (3.1.305-308)*

When Millamant appears in Act II Scene I of the play with Mincing and young Witwoud, she automatically takes the centre of the stage as if it is her right, as indeed it is. Her character is outlined in the Act II Scene I about putting up one's hair. Prose would never do, only poetry, a piece of flippancy in which Mincing immediately abets

her. Here she is revealed as complete belle. She is affectation that is fully conscious of itself, and flippancy that delights in its own irreverence. She is completely sure of her feminine power, and Congreve has given her the line to justify her assurance. The lines concerning suitors- one makes them, one destroys them, and one makes others- are all flippant. She knows her power and can laugh at herself, just as she can tease Mirabell:

*Sententious Mirabell! ... What, with that Face...in a love-sick Face. Ha, ha, ha (2.1.476-484)*

Within the limited world where she operates, she is intelligent. She sees through the forced false wit of young Witwoud's humour and handles him gracefully and efficiently. "Dear Mr. Witwoud, Truce with your similitudes: For I am sick of 'em" and "Yet again! Mincing, stand between me and his Wit" (Sengupta, 1.2.153-155) are deft lines which give Witwoud precisely the attention he merits. She is shrewd enough to see through Mrs. Marwood and mitigates her violent Airs:

*I'll take my Death, Marwood, you are more Censorious than a decay'd Beauty... That Mirabell loves me is no more a Secret, than it is a Secret that you discover'd it to my Aunt, or than the Reason why you discover'd it is a Secret (3.1.325-332)*

The love of Mirabell and Millamant bears no relationship to the rest of the story. It pursues an independent course unconcerned with the general wrangle over property and wealth. Millamant loves Mirabell but, she knows that admission will mean surrender and surrender may mean loss of identity. She is supremely confident of Mirabell's love for her and she accepts the adulation of men as her natural due – but with such lack of affectation, that no one can take offence. She is airy, teasing, light, beautiful, tantalizing and infuriating. There is no coquetry, no feminine vanity. Millamant is fighting—fighting to gain time, fighting for herself and for the rights of every woman, fighting for the survival of the individual.

Mrs. Marwood is not carefully drawn. She has been projected as the mistress of Fainall, but she loves Mirabell, and this secret unfulfilled love is the motivating force behind all her actions, her jealousy keeps her alert and she is quick to notice. Hypocrisy is a necessary part of the way of her world for everyone, but it is the most significant characteristic of Mrs. Marwood. We first meet Mrs. Marwood talking to Mrs. Fainall. Both the women speak hypocritically, both are engaged in delicate maneuvers designed to gain information but to reveal none, both are suspicious:

*Ay, ay, Marwood, if we will be happy...only in compliance with my Mother's Humour...but I wou'd have him ever to continue upon the Rack of Fear and Jealousie...favourable Enemies (2.1.1-80)*

Mrs. Marwood is hypocritical in her relation with Fainall. She can pretend to be wholeheartedly and unreservedly in love with him, which actually she is disguising her feelings for Mirabell, not with complete success. Her disguised love for Mirabell is an important motivation in the action. It is one- although only one- reasons why she encourages Fainall in his plot. The social mask she wears; imperfectly conceals her nature and when in St James's Park the brittle surface of her sophistication cracks, we are shocked at the revelation of the violent passions underneath:

*I care not – Let me go – break my Hands, do – I'd leave 'em to get loose (2.1.233-234)*

When Millamant insults her, taunting her with love for Mirabell and her greater age she decides to take revenge like the traditional villain of the tragedies of the period because her vanity is offended. Nevertheless, Mrs. Marwood's essential hypocrisy and villainy show up most clearly in her relation with Lady Wishfort. Here she feigns friendship. She tries to spoil Mirabell's plan; as confidante and advisor, she tries to get Lady Wishfort to accede to Fainall's demands. There is, in short, no one on the stage with whom she makes her relations without lies and purposes. In some ways, Mrs.

Marwood is much more a complex character than her partner, Mr. Fainall in crime. She lacks his ferocity and his wit, but within a narrower circuit, she has more cunning and more practical sense and that particular brand of viciousness that is often associated with the female of the species.

Mrs. Fainall, despite her past indiscretion with Mirabell, is a good woman. She is generous, she bears no malice towards anyone and, though denied happiness herself, is able to find genuine pleasure in the happiness of Mirabell and Millamant. However, there is nothing outstanding in her personality and beside Millamant she pales into insignificance. She acts as a foil to her more brilliant cousin and her unhappy life almost makes her into a sacrificial offering at the altar of society. It is Congreve's way of telling us that if the well-being of the society has to be preserved, a price will have to be paid. In the end, because of Mirabell's help, she gains the upper hand over her husband. As per Mr. Fainall:

*She is a leaky Hulk which he will set adrift to sink or swim (5.1.54-55)*

Foible is obviously a very intelligent young woman and, like all servants, presumably eager to play the go-between Lady Wishfort and Mirabell. She is tactful. When Mrs. Marwood informs Lady Wishfort that she has seen Foible in conversation with Mirabell she manages the matter all right with her lady and shows extraordinary invention so that Lady Wishfort suspects no conspiracy against her. Her loyalties are not clear; although Lady Wishfort's maid, she is prepared to deceive her, her loyalty to Mirabell is based on clear pecuniary interest. In the final analysis, she is like everybody else in the play. Her loyalty is only to herself. Foible has her moment when she tells Lady Wishfort, with delightful irony:

*A little Art once made your Picture like you; and now a little of the same Art must make you like your Picture (3.1.153-155)*

Wit is revealed in the perfect control of vocabulary, in the

polished, epigrammatic elegance of style and the delicate antithetical balance of the sentences. Mincing and Betty though have less significance compared to the other heavy and rooted characters of the play. However, their wit is no way lagging behind. Betty's witty answer to Mirabell when he asked what time it was:

*Turn'd of the last Canonical Hour (8 a.m to noon), Sir. (1.1.112)*

*The Way of the World* reflects attitudes concerning sexuality that prevailed for centuries. The play suggests the most fascinating aspect of sexual relationship. In this play, the women characters are energetic and clever, bold and intelligent, and held a free spirit. From the reading of this play *The Way of the World*, we see that Lady Wishfort is a man-seeking amorous widow who likes flattery. Millamant comes out to be an intelligent and dominating character, imposing herself on others. She is fighting for herself, for every woman and for the survival of the individual. Mrs. Marwood's jealousy and her conspiracy with Fainall show us how a woman can go to the extreme to fulfill her goals. Mrs. Fainall is the perfect example of a sacrificing woman who has to happy with others happiness. Foible is the selfish character who is dedicated only to herself. They are witty and full of humour and irony. Wit involves imagery, and the antithetical and epigrammatic sentences lend themselves to the use of simile and metaphor. They heighten the artistry of the style, but the imagery also gives us glimpses of the larger background of seventeenth century life of the women. The female characters take pleasure in gossiping private and secret lives of others and equally take part in verbal confrontation irrespective of the sex. They have their own identity and individuality in the society of the Restoration age.

Congreve's characterization of the strong female protagonist thus served as a prototype for the modern female heroine that would follow in later contemporary drama, and it played a major

role in shaping the way modern society came to treat women.

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